

**Initiative and Referendum Task Force
Summer 2017
Literature Review – Ballot Measures and Voter Turnout**

Introduction

The following is a review of the most recent academic scholarship on the impact direct democracy has on voter turnout. A potential problem with the use of direct democracy is roll-off (also referenced as ballot non-completion). Several explanations exist for what prompts ballot roll-off: salience of the race, ballot confusion, and voter fatigue (Bullock and Dunn 1996). Salience impacts roll-off because the less salient races require more work on the part of the voter to educate themselves on the candidates or issues. Ballot confusion encourages roll-off because voters are thrown off when less salient races are placed before more important races. Voter fatigue is when voters do not cast a vote for contests at the bottom of the ballot because they worn out a longer process, a process whose costs incurred include gathering information and making choices regarding a number of candidates and ballot measures. Regardless of which explanation one subscribes to, questions arise surrounding direct democracy's role in creating an electoral environment conducive to ballot roll-off or lower voter turnout.

The study of voter turnout and direct democracy has been through an academic evolution, one that has produced contradictory results over time. This evolution was stimulated by a number of things. Initial studies from the 1980s found no relationship between turnout and direct democracy. However, they focused on a time period in which direct democracy was infrequently used (Cronin 1989; Everson 1981; Magleby 1984). The next wave of studies, conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s, found a positive relationship between presence of direct democracy within a state and an increase in

turnout (i.e. Bowler & Donovan 1998; Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001). Increased turnout, political knowledge, and political efficacy were all attributed to citizens' ability to participate through direct democracy.

Recently, scholars have again taken up the study of direct democracy and voter turnout, in part because of the increasing presence of measures on the ballot, but also because of methodological and theoretical shortcomings of the previous studies. A new line of inquiry takes into account the variety in types of elections, types of ballot measure, and laws surrounding the ease of getting a measure on the ballot and/or amending it upon passage. Ultimately, this scholarship finds that 1) there is a positive impact on turnout in certain contexts, but not all, 2) ballot roll-off can be attributed to the number of measures on a ballot, but that roll-off appears to be steady over time, and 3) voter fatigue is a legitimate concern for states experiencing a large number of measures on a ballot. The following literature review will expound on this summary.

Direct Democracy and Increased Voter Turnout

Studies from the 2000s found a positive correlation between a states' use of direct democracy and voter turnout. For example, Smith (2001) and Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith (2001) found that turnout increases in states with direct democracy. However, they condition their findings, maintaining that turnout is largely impacted only in midterm elections and elections with "salient" initiatives on the ballot. Midterm elections are less intense and as a result, ballot measures become the salient contests in the election cycle (Schlozman and Yohai 2008; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003). "Salient" initiatives on the ballot increase turnout in midterm elections by about 3% (Smith 2001).

Studies have also found a simple dichotomy of whether a state has direct democracy is an inaccurate measure (Grummel 2013). To more accurately gauge the impact of direct democracy, studies need to account for the type of measure, the competitiveness of measures, the substance of the measure, and the number of measures on the ballot. In regards to type of measure, two things appear to impact how influential direct democracy is on turnout. Childers and Binder (2012) find competitive initiatives have more of an effect on turnout than uncompetitive ones. Measured by campaign expenditures, the authors find that the presence of a competitive initiative on the ballot increase turnout by 10%, about the same amount as having a politically competitive state makeup (50-50% Republicans and Democrats).

Childers and Binder (2015) note that competitiveness of a measure isn't the only thing that impacts turnout. Using all initiatives from 1890-2012, but dividing them by type and competitiveness, the authors find that competitive initiatives have the largest impact on turnout. Uncompetitive initiatives and competitive legislative referendums had the second and third largest impact, respectively. Holding all else constant, uncompetitive legislative referendums, and all types of popular referendums did not affect turnout rates. The substantive nature of the ballot measure also influences how much the measure impacts turnout. Grummel (2008) and Biggers (2011) find that ballot measures dealing with moral policy, things like gay rights, abortion, and stem cell research, see increased rates of turnout.

Beyond type, competitiveness, and substance of a ballot measure, the number of ballot measures impacts turnout. For each additional competitive initiative on the ballot, turnout increases by 1.7% (Childers and Binder 2015). However, the impact on turnout

is not linear and stagnates as the number of ballot measures are added. Grummel (2013) also finds that studies must account for how the variable “ballot measure” is measured. If you measure the number of ballot measures by counting all types of measures, there is a significant and negative impact on turnout. If you look only at citizen-driven initiatives, there is no statistically significant impact on turnout. And, if you measure “ballot measure” as the presence of the direct democracy process in a state, there is a significant and positive impact on turnout.

When looking at the overall length and position of ballot measures, a number of studies have found an impact on the success rate. Augenblick and Nicholson (2015) found that propositions’ approval rates were lower when placed further down on the ballot. For each position down the ballot, a proposition received .12% fewer votes in favor of the measure. However, Matsusaka (2015) found no evidence that being listed at the top versus the bottom of a ballot impacted the success rate of a measure. Rather, he found the overall length of the ballot influenced success. Looking at the ballots in California (1958-2014) and Texas (1986-2015), Matsusaka found that success rates were lower for measures with more total number of measures on the ballot. For each additional measure on the ballot, approval for all measures drops by .3%. Given that order position did not seem to matter, but total length did, Matsusaka hypothesizes that “voters simply dislike long ballots and adopt a negative orientation when asked to resolve a large number of issues. (2015, 26)”

Ballot Roll-Off and Voter Fatigue

The rate of ballot roll-off was significant for ballot measures in the 1970s and 1980s, with studies finding anywhere from 5-15% roll-off (Bowler, Donovan, and Happ 1992; Cronin 1989; Magleby 1984; Manweller 2004). However, since the 1980s, fall-off rates have steadied or declined. Still, ballot roll-off is prevalent in states with ballot measures (Augenblick and Nicholson 2015).

Scholars have found a number of factors influencing this ballot roll-off phenomenon. Tangibly, things like length and readability of a measure, campaign spending on a measure, placement on the ballot, and type of measure all appear to influence whether a voter decides to abstain from voting on a measure (Bowler, Donovan, and Happ 1992). The type of voter also appears to matter. Mila (2017) attributes ballot roll-off to three individual-level factors: low issue information, risk aversion, and ambivalence to the ballot measure's issue. Nicholson (2003) finds that as the number of ballot measures on a California ballot increase, the less voters were aware of any particular ballot measure.

While some choice is beneficial for voters, "choice overload" leads to a number of problems (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). Psychologically speaking, a large number of choices can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, a sense of paralysis, and a fear of being held responsible for bad decisions (Botti and Iyengar 2006; Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Mick et. al 2004; Schwartz 2004; but see Greifeneder et. al 2010 for a counter view). Augenblick and Nicholson (2015) attribute anywhere from 6-8% of voters' abstention on ballot measures to "choice fatigue". On top of all of these individual

feelings, “decision aversion” is worsened when people are making choices for other versus when they are making choices for themselves (Iyenger and Lepper 2000).

All of this said, roll-off associated with ballot measures is on the decline. Scholars hypothesize this might be a result of voters simply becoming more comfortable with the increasing informational costs associated with voting on an increasing number of ballot measures (Bowler, Donocan, and Happ 1992) or the power to decide (Matsusaka 2015).

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